

The Pet from Carpet Bagdad

by HAROLD MACGRATH
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The MAN ON THE BOX etc.
Illustrations by M.G. KETNER
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CHAPTER VII.

Ryanne Tables His Cards.

During this time Mrs. Chedsoye, the major, Messrs. Ryanne and Wallace, officers and directors in the United Romance and Adventure Company, Ltd., sat in the major's room, round table, sat in the major's room, round table. The scene would not have been without interest either to the speculative physiognomist or to the dramatist. To each it would have represented one of those astonishing moments when the soul of a person comes out into the open, as one might expect it, incautiously, to be revealed in the expressions of the eyes and the mouth. These four persons were about going forward upon a singularly desperate and unusual enterprise. From now on they were no longer to fence with one another, to shift from this topic to that, with the indirect maneuvers of a house-cat intent upon the quest of the Friday mackerel. The woman's face was alive with eagerness; the oldest man looked from one to the other with earnest calculation; Wallace no longer hid his cupidry; Ryanne's immobility of countenance was in itself a tacit admission to the burning of all his bridges that he might become a part of this conclave.

"Smuggling," said the major, with prudent lowering of voice, evidently continuing some previous debate, "smuggling is a fine art, a keen sporting proposition; and the consequences of discovery are never serious. What's a fine of a thousand dollars against the profits of many successful excursions into the port of New York? Nothing, comparatively. For several years, now, we have carried on this business with the utmost adroitness. Never have we drawn serious attention. We have made two or three blunders, but the suspicions of the secret-service were put to sleep upon each occasion. We have prospered. Here is a gem, let us say, worth on this side a thousand; over there we sell it for enough to give us a clean profit of three or four hundred. Forty per cent. upon our investment. That ought to be enough for any reasonable person. Am I right?"

Mrs. Chedsoye alone was unresponsive to this appeal.

"I continue, then. We are making enough to lay by something for our old age. And that's the only goal which never loses its luster. But this affair!"

"Talk, talk," said Mrs. Chedsoye impatiently.

"My dear Kate, allow me to relieve my mind."

"You have done so till the topic is threadbare. It is rather late in the day to go over the ground again. Time is everything just now."

"Admitted. But this affair, Kate, is big; big with dangers, big with pitfalls; there is a hidden menace in every step of it. Mayhap death; who knows? The older I grow, the more I cling to material comforts, to enterprises of small dangers. However, as you infer, there's no going back now."

"No," assented Ryanne, his mouth hard; "not if I have to proceed alone."

She smiled at him. "You talk of danger," speaking to the major. "What danger can there be?"

"The unforeseen danger, the danger of which we know nothing, and therefore are unable to prepare for it. You do not see it, my dear, but it is there, nevertheless."

Wallace nodded approvingly. Ryanne shrugged.

"Failure is practically impossible."

"I accept it as such. I am tired of petty things. I repeat, failure is not possible. Have I not thought it out, detail by detail, mapped out each line, anticipated dangers by eliminating them?"

"All but that one danger of which we know nothing. You're a great woman, Kate. You have, as you say, made ninety-nine dangers out of a hundred impossible. Let us keep an eye out for that hundredth. Our photographs have yet to grace the rogues' gallery."

"With one exception," Ryanne's laughter was sardonic.

"Whose?" shot the major.

"Mine. A round and youthful phiz, a silky young mustache. But rest easy; there's no likeness between that and the original one I wear now."

"You never told me," began Mrs. Chedsoye.

"There was never any need till now. Eight years ago. Certain powers that be worked toward my escape. But I was never to return. You will recollect that I have always remained this side. Enough. What I did does not matter. I will say this much: my crime was in being found out. One venture into New York and out to sea again; they will not have a chance. I doubt if any could recall the circumstances of my meteoric career. You will observe that I am keyed for anything. Let us get to work. It doesn't matter, anyhow."

"You did not" Mrs. Chedsoye hesitated.

"Blood!" reading her thought. "No, Gloconda; my hands are guiltless, at least they were till this Bagdad affair; and I am not sure there. I was a trusted clerk; I gambled; I took money that did not belong to me. And here I am, room number 208."

"It doesn't matter. Come, Kate; don't stare at Hoddie as if he were a new species." The major smoothed the ends of his mustache. "This confession will be good for his soul."

"Yes, Gloconda; I feel easier now. I am heart and soul in this affair. I need excitement, too. Lord, yes. When I went to Bagdad, I had no idea that I should ever lay eyes upon that rug. But I did. And there's the emeralds, too, major."

The major rubbed his hands pleasantly. "Yes, yes; the emeralds; I had not forgotten them. One hundred lovely green stones, worth not a penny under thirty thousand. A fine collection. But another idea has taken possession of this teeming brain of mine. Have you noticed how this fellow Jones hovers about Fortune? He's worth a million, if he's worth a cent. I am sure, in pure gratitude, she would see to it that her loved ones were well taken care of in their old age."

"I am going to marry Fortune myself," said Ryanne blandly.

"You?" The major was nonplussed.

Wallace shuffled his feet uneasily. This blond companion of his was always showing kinks in his nature, kinks that rarely ever straightened out.

"Yes. And why not? What is she to either you or her mother? Nothing. Affection you have never given her, being unable. It surprises you; but, nevertheless, I love her, and I am going to marry her."

"Really?" said Mrs. Chedsoye.

"Even so."

"You are a fool, Horace!" with rising fury. "Go then, the child had not loved her in a moment of plague?"

"In a moment generally are fools."

I've never spoken before, because you never absolutely needed me till now. There's my cards, pat."

Mrs. Chedsoye's face deepened, but not visibly. "You are welcome to her, if she will have you."

"Yes," supplemented the major; "if she will have you, my friend, take her, and our benedictions."

Ryanne's shoulders stirred suggestively.

"Of course, I expect to have the final word to say on the subject. She is my daughter," said Mrs. Chedsoye.

"A trifling accident, my dear Gloconda," smiled Ryanne. "merely that."

"Just a little oil, just a little oil," the major pleaded anxiously. "Dash it all, this is no time for a row of this silly order. But it's always the way. Irritably. A big enterprise, demanding a single purpose, and a trifle like this to upset it all!"

"I am ready for business at any moment."

"And you, Kate?"

"Well say no more about it till the affair is over. After that"

"Those who live will see, eh?" Ryanne rolled a cigarette.

"To business, then. In the first place, Mr. Jones must not reach the Ludwig."

"He will not," Ryanne spoke with quiet assurance.

"He will not even see that boat."

added Wallace, glad to hear the sound of his voice again.

"Good. But, mind, no rough work." "Leave it all to me," said Ryanne. "The United Romance and Adventure Company will give him an adventure on approval, as it were."

"To you, then. The report from New York reads encouragingly. Our friends there are busy. They are merely waiting for us. From now on Percival Algernon must receive no more mail, telegrams or cables."

"I'll take care of that also," Ryanne looked at Mrs. Chedsoye musingly.

"His real estate agent will wire him, possibly tomorrow."

"In that event, he will receive a cable signifying that the transaction is perfectly correct."

"He may also inquire as to what to do with the valuables in the wall-safe."

"He will be instructed to touch nothing, as the people who will occupy the house are old friends," Ryanne smoked calmly.

"Wallace, you will return to New York at once."

"I thought I was wanted here?"

"No longer."

"All right; I'm off. I'll sail on the Prince Ludwig, stateroom 118. I'll have my joke by the way."

"You will do nothing of the kind. You will have a stateroom by yourself," said Mrs. Chedsoye crisply. "And no wine, nor cards. If you fail, I'll break you"

"As we would a churchwarden's pipe, Wallace, my lad," Ryanne gripped his companion by the shoulder, and there was enough pressure in the grip to cause the recipient to wince.

"Well, well; I'll lay a straight course," Wallace slid his shoulder under Ryanne's hand.

"To you, then, Hoddie, the business of quarantining our friend Percival. Don't hurt him; simply detain him. You must realize the importance of this. Have you your plans?"

"I'll perfect them tomorrow. I shall find a way, never fear."

"Does the rug come in anywhere?" The major was curious. It sometimes seemed to him that Ryanne did not always lay his cards face up upon the table.

"It will play its part. Besides, I am rather inclined to the idea of taking it back. It may be the old wishing-carpet. In that case, it will come in handy. Who knows?"

"How much is it worth?"

"Ah, major, Percival himself could not say exactly. He gave me a thousand pounds for it."

"A thousand pounds!" murmured Wallace.

The major struck his hands lightly together. Whether in applause or wonder he alone knew.

"And it was worth every shilling of it, too. I'll tell you the story some day. There are a dozen ways of suppressing Percival, but I must have something appealing to my artistic side."

"You have never told us your real name, Horace," Mrs. Chedsoye bent toward him.

He laughed. "I must have something to confess to you in the future, dear Gloconda."

"Well, the meeting adjourns, sine die."

"What are you going to do with Fortune?" demanded Ryanne.

"Send her back to Mentone."

"What the deuce did you bring her here for, knowing what was in the wind?"

"She expressed a desire to see Cairo again," answered Mrs. Chedsoye.

"We never deny her anything," The major rose and yawned suggestively. In the corridor, Ryanne whispered softly: "Why not, Gloconda?"

"She shall never marry a man of your stamp," coldly.

"Charming mother! How tenderly you have cherished her!"

"Horace," calmly enough, "is it wise to anger me?"

"It may not be wise, but I have never seen you in a rage. You would be magnificent."

"Cease this foolery," patiently. "I am in no mood for it tonight. As an associate in this equivocal business, you do very well; you are necessary. But do not presume too much upon that. For all that I may not have been what a mother should be, I still have some power over her. Fortune shall never marry a man so far down in the social scale as yourself."

"Social scale? Gloconda, how you hurt me!" mockingly. "I should really like to know what your idea of that invincible barrier is. Is it because my face is in the rogues' gallery? Surely, you would not be cruel!"

"She is far above us all, my friend," continuing unruffled. "Sometimes I stand in absolute awe of her."

"A marvel! If my recollection is not at fault, many a man has entered the Villa Fanny, with a view to courtship, men beside whom I am as Roland to the lowest Saracen. You never objected to them."

"They had money and position."

"Magic talisman! And if I had money and position?"

"My objections would be no less strong."

"Your code puzzles me. You would welcome as a son-in-law a man who stole openly the widow's mite, while I, who harass none, but the predatory rich, must dwell in the outland? Rank injustice!"

"You couldn't take care of her."

"Yes, I could. With but little effort I could make these two hands as honest as the day is long."

"I have my doubts," smiling a little. "Suppose, for the sake of an argument, suppose Fortune accepted me?"

Mrs. Chedsoye's good humor returned. She knew her daughter toler-

ably well; the child had a horror of men. "Poor Horace! Do you build upon that?"

"Less, perhaps, than upon my own bright invention. My suit, then to be brief, is rejected."

"Emphatically, I have spoken."

"Oh, well; the feminine prerogative shall be mine, the last word. Good night; dormi bene!" He bowed grandly and turned toward his own room.

He possessed that kind of mockery which was the despair of those at whom it was directed. They never knew whether his mood was one of harmless fun or of deadly intent. And rather than mistake the one quality for the other, they generally pretended to ignore. Mrs. Chedsoye, who had a similar talent, was one of the few who felt along the wall as one does in the dark, instinctively. Tonight she recognized that there was no harmless fun but a real desperateness behind the mask; and she had held in her temper with a firm hand. This was not the hour for a clash. She shivered a little; and for the first time in the six or seven years she had known him, she faced a fear of him.

His great strength, his reckless courage, his subtle way of mastering men by appearing to be mastered by them, held her in the thrall of a peculiar fascination which, in quiet periods, she looked upon as something deeper. Marriage was not to her an ideal state, nor was there any man, living or dead, who had appealed to the physical side of her. But he was in the one sex what she was in the other; and while she herself would never have married him, she raged inwardly at the possibility of his wanting another woman.

To her the social fabric which holds humanity together was merely a convenience; the moral significance touched neither her heart nor her mind. In her the primordial craving for ease, for material comforts, pretty trinkets and gowns was strongest developed. It was as if this sense had been handed down to her, untouched by contact with progression, from the remote ages, that time between the fall of Roman civilization and where modern civilization began. In short a beautiful barbarian, whose intellect alone had advanced.

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Fortune was asleep. The mother went over to the bed and gently shook the slim, round arm which lay upon

the coverlet. The child's nature lay revealed as she opened her eyes and smiled. It did not matter that the smile instantly changed to a frowning inquiry. The mother spoke truly when she said that there were times when she stood in awe of this, her flesh and blood.

"My child, I wish to ask you a question, and for your own good answer truthfully. Do you love Horace?"

Fortune sat up and rubbed her eyes. "No." Had her wits been less scattered she might have paltered.

The syllable had a finality to it that reassured the mother more than a thousand protestations would have done.

"Good night," she said.

Fortune lay down again and drew the coverlet up to her chin. With her eyes shut she waited, but in vain. Her mother disrobed and sought her own bed.

Ryanne was intensely dissatisfied with himself. For once his desperate mood had carried him too far. He had made too many confessions, had antagonized a woman who was every bit as clever and ingenious as himself. The enterprise toward which they were moving held him simply because it was an exploit that enticed wholly his twisted outlook upon life. There was a forbidding humor in the whole affair, too, which he alone saw. The possible rewards were to him of secondary consideration. It was the fun of the thing. It was the fun of the thing that had put him squarely upon the wide, short road to perdition, which had made him first a spendthrift, then a thief. The fun of the thing; sinister phrase! A thousand times had he longed to go back, for he wasn't all bad; but door after door had shut behind him; and now the single purpose was to get to the end of the road by the shortest route.

He did not deceive himself. His desperate mood was the result of an internal rage against himself, a rage against the weakness of his heart. Fortune Chedsoye. Why had she not crossed his path at that time when he might have been saved? And yet, would she have saved him? God alone knew.

He heard Jones stirring in his room next door. Presently all became still. To sleep like that! He shrugged, threw off his coat, swept the cover from the stand, found a pack of cards, and played solitaire till the first pallor of dawn announced the new day.

Reclining snugly against the parapet, wrapped in his tattered erbyeth, or cloak, his head pillowed upon his lean arm, motionless with that pretended sleep of the watcher, Mohamed-El-Gebel kept his vigil. Miles upon miles he had come, across three bleak, cold, blinding deserts, on camels, in trains, on camels again, night and day, day and night, across the soundless, yellow plains. Allah was good to the true believer. The night was chill, but certain fires warmed his blood. All day long he had followed the accursed, lying glaur, but never once had he wandered into the native quarters of the city. Patience! What was a day, a week, a year? Grains of sand. He could wait. Inshallah!

(To be continued.)

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"And there we are, Kate. It really isn't the gold; it's the excitement of getting it and coming away unscathed. I could only get you to look at all